

Tulane University (LA)
Fall 1982

Hostages, Hindsight, & Life in the CIA

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A Conversation with Stansfield Turner

by Garry Boulard

As snow fell in Washington that brisk Sunday morning in January 1981, Stansfield Turner, then head of the Central Intelligence Agency, sensed the mounting pressure and excitement as he and his wife neared the White House.

"I knew there really wasn't any reason for me to be there," the fifty-eight-year-old Carter appointee recalled. "There wasn't anything for me to do, but I just felt like I should be with the people I had worked with all those months in one of their most important hours."

An official White House photo released later in the day captured the drama of the moment: Turner, still in his overcoat, sits in a corner of the Oval Office, while such one-time heavyweights as Walter Mondale, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Ed Muskie, and G. William Miller await the latest word on the release of Iran's U.S. hostages—an ordeal that had plagued so many political careers.

In the middle of the photo stands the man who in two days would no longer be this country's commander-in-chief. Somewhat beleaguered, almost certainly tired, President Jimmy Carter appeared to be lost in thought.

Despite the high drama of the situation, Turner remembered a few funny and even emotional incidents that occurred before the hostages were released and Ronald Reagan was sworn in as the next president. "We were, for the most part, just sitting around, hoping for some new breakthrough, trying to remain calm. We'd all go into another room for coffee and to chat, then the phone would ring, and we'd all run back into the Oval Office. It got to be a little ridiculous after a while."

Even as Carter's final hours as president dwindled, he continued to perform some of the ceremonial functions required of that high office. Turner was

slated to receive the National Security Medal for his almost four years as chief of the ever-controversial CIA.

"I left a message with the White House that they didn't have to go through with the ceremony. I knew the president was tired and I thought they could just mail the medal to me," said Turner. But Carter was adamant. He wanted to personally thank the CIA director for his service to the country. For Turner, a man not given to sentimental display, the gesture was heartfelt.

In New Orleans this summer to address the Tulane Founder's Society, Turner, a devotee of twelve-hour workdays who seems to gain energy as the day wears on, held an hour-long press conference, appeared on a local television show, hobnobbed with local officials, and in between it all raced back to his hotel room to make several business calls to New York.

A graduate of Annapolis, where he ranked ahead of classmate Carter in 1946, Turner also graduated from Oxford University before assuming a variety of naval duties ranging from commanding a minesweeper to running a guided missile frigate.

After twenty years of naval service, he was promoted to rear admiral in 1970 and later became commander of the Second Fleet in the Atlantic. He became known as something of an innovator in that position and made a practice of checking up on the readiness of his ships by making surprise helicopter visits.

When Carter tapped Turner to head the CIA in 1977, that agency had just gone through one of the most difficult periods of its thirty-five-year history. A congressional investigating committee headed by former senior Democratic senator Frank Church of Idaho had recommended sharp controls over what it viewed as the CIA's rampant abuse of the privacy of

American citizens and the covert action taken against governments such as those of Cuba and Chile, where certain political movements thought to be anti-American were ruthlessly squelched or attacked.

One result of that congressional recommendation was the 1974 Hughes-Ryan Amendment, which stipulated that before the CIA undertook any operation which would involve it in the business of a foreign country, the president of the United States would have to justify that activity as essential to the security of this nation and then officially inform various congressional committees.

Such balance-of-power juggling acts would later prompt Carter to complain that every time he wanted to conduct any sort of covert action, he was obligated to inform seven or eight congressional committees.

Presently lecturing across the country and appearing on NBC as a military correspondent, the graying, physically fit Turner refutes George Bernard Shaw's description of top-level government officials as "people who have no souls, and are born stale."

On the contrary, in a wide-ranging conversation with *Tulanian*, Turner proved that he's not afraid to express his opinion, whether the subject is the press ("Most reporters are looking for that big Watergate-like story and if they don't find it they'll practically make one up") or the present foreign policy of the Reagan Administration ("It has been primarily one of poor planning and mixed signals.")

Tulanian: The battle for the Falkland Islands seems to be, for the time being anyway, settled. Were there any lessons for us to learn from this struggle?

Turner: There were a lot of them. First and foremost: don't get involved in a war when you don't have a vital interest involved.



Tulanian: *United Nations Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick criticized the official U.S. action of coming out in favor of Great Britain as early as we did. Do you agree with her outlook?*

Turner: No, I disagree strongly. We had no choice but to side with our most important ally. We had no choice but to work within the NATO framework rather than the Latin American framework. On top of that, the Argentinians were the aggressors, and the United Nations has condemned that aggression. So I think we did the right thing. To me the only question is if we should have come down on the side of Great Britain even earlier than we did. It might have been more effective in toning down the Argentinians if we had come out against them from the beginning.

Tulanian: *Where do we go from here with respect to Argentina? Many reports have shown what seems to be a very arrogant stance by both the old and new Argentine governments in the sunset of their defeat. Do you see any hope for a renewed relationship between the United States and Argentina?*

Turner: No, clearly not in the near future. There are great feelings of anger and bitterness on the part of the Argentine government and its people against the United States, so at the present I don't think we'd be well advised to spend a great amount of time and effort in such an endeavor. In time we might want to be useful to the Argentinians in helping to rebuild their economy. They're deeply in debt... the economy is not running well, and if the new government is receptive to some advice and aid and some rescheduling of their debts, I think we could be helpful there. We can provide that help. The Soviet Union cannot. And, of course, we want to keep the Soviet influence in the hemisphere to a minimum.

Tulanian: *One of the upshots of the Falkland crisis seems to be the tremendous amount of speculation we're hearing about the condition and potential of our naval capabilities. As a former naval officer, do you have any insight into what our weak and strong points are?*

Turner: One major lesson of the war, which should not be a lesson, is that ships

are vulnerable to missiles and this is the advanced missile age. I say it should not be a lesson in that we should have clearly known that a long time ago. There have been a number of ships sunk in war by missiles in the past; any serious capability study would show that. But our navy has not taken those factors into consideration and is still building very large, very expensive ships. I think that's unwise. I think we would find that modern technology will permit us to perform almost as well with smaller ships as with the bigger ones.

In the Falklands case, the very low performance airplanes that the British had on their small carriers did remarkably well against high performance jets from the Argentine side, largely because they had a very capable U.S. air-to-air missile to do the fighting for them. We must also not forget the importance of supplies. The whole war, really, was a war of "Could the British get enough men and supplies onto those islands?" Once they did, there was no question as to who was going to win.

Tulanian: *Was using the luxury liner Queen Elizabeth a sign of desperation on the part of the British?*

Turner: I thought it was a sign of ingeniousness. You see, had they tried to maintain that size of ship for that amount of transport for troops as a purely naval resource, it would have been very costly. As long as they felt confident to call upon it, it seemed to me that it was not an unreasonable move to make. Now, they called on lots more merchant ships to carry cargo down there. I don't think the United States ought to be quite that dependent upon the merchant marine. First of all, we don't have that kind of control over our merchant marine.

The battle of the Falklands was a battle between a sea power—Great Britain—and a land power—Argentina. Argentina had a strategic advantage of being close, but had a strategic disadvantage of having to fight over islands when it was a land power. Once the British cut the islands off with their submarine blockade, the only question in the whole war became whether or not the Argentine air force and navy could prevent the British from getting the men and supplies on the island. And they had a reasonable go at it. But they weren't able to sustain their air force attacks on the fleet. The Argentine air force wore down faster than did the British navy, and that's why the war came out the way it did.

Tulanian: *Do you think Britain should be gallant in victory and negotiate for a*

settlement of who should and who should not have eventual control of the islands?

Turner: Yes. I think the British are making a very serious mistake in victory and are going to lose the peace as a result. If they continue with their intransigent stands, the Argentines will certainly maintain their position that they will reattack... sometime. That means that the British will have to garrison the islands with troops, ships, and equipment at considerable expense to them and to their NATO obligations. I believe the British public will tire of that expense sooner than will the Argentines. It will cost the Argentines, also, because they will have to rebuild their army, navy, and air force. But they would probably do that anyway.

Any British garrison of this nature would look very much like colonialism to most of Latin America, and it will make it more difficult for Great Britain... and, to some extent, to us, to resume normal relations with all the rest of Latin America. So if the British refuse to negotiate the fate of the islands, it will be a very serious mistake.

Tulanian: *Would your former boss, President Carter, have done anything differently in this crisis?*

Turner: Well, it's pretty hard to speculate. I don't think there are any ideological differences between Mr. Carter and Mr. Reagan on this... well, let's see: Mr. Carter was, of course, much stronger against Argentina for its human rights record, so maybe he would have come out initially for the British instead of waiting to see what would have happened with the negotiations. It's just so hard to speculate about what might have happened in a given situation.

Tulanian: *You were the tenth director of the CIA in a thirty-year period.*

Turner: I was only there two and one-half years when I became the longest director in tenure except for Mr. [Allen] Dulles and Mr. [Richard] Helms.

Tulanian: *Considering that record—what might seem to some to be a great amount of turnover in a top government agency—does it seem to you that the CIA has had a history of instability in its uppermost offices?*

Turner: Oh no. I think there's a great continuity in the agency among all the professionals there who are very capable people. But I do agree with the point

you're making, and that is that the tenure of the directors has been short. The number went up considerably because Mr. [James] Schlesinger stayed only about six months until the president decided to move him to the secretary of defense slot, and Mr. [George] Bush stayed only a year because there was an election change, and because Bush was such a prominent Republican it became very difficult for a Democratic president to keep him.

I think the one thing that concerns me is that the appointment not be seen as political. While Mr. Bush and Mr. [William] Casey, the present director, are very capable people, I think there's a risk in appointing men who have such pure identifications with a domestic political party, because they don't carry over into a new administration very easily. One could hardly expect whoever the next Democratic president is to accept the former Republican chairman as his intelligence adviser. When you put a political person in there, you build in a turnover rate which is unnecessary.

Tulanian: When you were first appointed by President Carter to become the head of the CIA, one national journal asked if you, a person who had not worked within the CIA, would be able "to run the company," or if the "company would run you." Which happened?

Turner: (Laughs) I don't have any doubt that I ran the company. The company was a pretty loyal organization. Now any bureaucracy is difficult to move, to change... but that doesn't have to be the CIA. I had just as many troubles in the navy, as far as causing change goes, as I did in the CIA. But that's just a normal bureaucratic effort. I found the people there to be quite understanding of the fact that they were working for a director who was not a professional intelligence officer.

Tulanian: When you look back on your involvement with the CIA during the Iranian hostage crisis, was there anything that should have been done that wasn't? Was the U.S. wrong in negotiating and bartering as it did?

Turner: If I had it to do over... based on hindsight... I would have tried the hostage rescue operation sooner. I think we could have pulled it off. We had very bad luck; it didn't work. But I think it was the right thing to do and I think in the long run it had some impact on Iran's decision to give the hostages up. It was a frustrating experience because there was nobody in Iran whom we could negotiate

with. Yet we tried to negotiate for a long period of time. But what we found, and this was not easy to predict, was that each time the negotiator "Gentleman X" told us something, "Gentleman Y" would come out and oppose whatever we had negotiated with, because by opposing it and making Gentleman X appear to be a friend of the United States, he'd gain political stature inside Iran. They used us a foil for domestic politics.

Tulanian: That must have been a very maddening, tiring situation.

Turner: It was. I think the six months between the taking of the hostages and our hostage rescue effort were the most wearing, trying six months of my thirty-five years in government. It was the only time I can recall that at one stage I was physically worn down. I really overtaxed my stamina... my ability to hold stamina.

Tulanian: That's a feeling you haven't experienced often?

Turner: No. I've learned over the years, particularly when you're out at sea and there's a lot of activity and pressure, that you must pace yourself so that you don't wear down. The sailor knows that the battle may still come tomorrow. In the middle of January 1980 I was tired enough that I actually took five days off and went out west to play tennis.

Tulanian: Some reports had it that President Carter consulted with Israeli military officials in the Iranian raid. And that they told him it would be almost impossible to accomplish what he hoped to do—that is, free the hostages.

Turner: Well, it was a very different raid from the type that they conducted in Entebbe, that's true. But considering what we've learned from the hostages since they've come back, I believe that had we got to Tehran, we would have had a better chance than we thought of extricating the hostages. We knew there were risks at every stage... but there also weren't many alternatives. We were, frankly, concerned for the hostages' lives. Those who were holding them were not rational people. At any point during this whole thing, we knew that they could have been tortured or killed and we felt an obligation to do something to ward that off.

Tulanian: After the Church Committee hearings, which did not exactly put the CIA in the best light, do you feel the agency can still be effective?

Turner: I think the CIA is very effective today. The reports on the constraints are much exaggerated. In fact, many of the controls that were placed upon the CIA in the mid-1970s have actually strengthened the agency. When an agency has to operate in secret and is not under any controls, there are dangers to the agency and to the country. The controls that have been put in place make the agency think more carefully when it proceeds to develop a plan of action and give it some opportunity to bounce those ideas off either the White House or the congressional committees. That can make it a stronger, more vibrant agency.

Tulanian: Arthur Schlesinger has criticized the CIA's cloak-and-dagger life, writing that he thought in every president there was a "James Bond signalling to get out." In the early 1960s, Harry Truman, who helped create the CIA, said that if he had known what was going to happen, he would never have created the agency in the first place.

Turner: I've never heard of that. Harry Truman said that?

Tulanian: According to Merle Miller.

Turner: I've never heard that kind of quotation before. I just don't know what Harry Truman had in mind. In 1960 he said that?

Tulanian: In 1963. And he had earlier expressed concern over the Bay of Pigs fiasco.

Turner: Other than being upset over the Bay of Pigs, I don't know what Truman might have been thinking of. To me, the CIA has run a remarkably effective service for our country over thirty some years. On the cloak-and-dagger territory, which is the most controversial as opposed to the collecting and interpreting of intelligence, I think on balance the cloak-and-dagger operations have provided more good than harm. The CIA had made a great mistake in publicizing some of those operations because it has led people to think that it can do more than it can and can accomplish more than it can accomplish. A lot of people think we can overturn any government we want to overturn as long as we turn the CIA loose on it. That wasn't true in the beginning; it's less true today. □

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